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At the GSA, Security Papers Just Lie Around

Some of the nation's most sensitive security documents are so loosely guarded that one of my reporters was able to walk in off the streets and pick them up.

But let something tawdry occur, and our elected leaders will pull up the covers. They'll invoke national security and reach for the secrecy stamp in an attempt to cover up the embarrassment.

They won't hesitate to use the secrecy stamp to censor the news. Yet they are much less vigilant when it comes to protecting the real secrets that could affect the nation's safety.

The White House, for example, is the nerve center of the entire federal government. High fences, patrolled by armed men and sophisticated electronic devices, keep out intruders. Planes are forbidden to fly overhead.

Detailed plans of the White House electrical, sewer and shelter systems could provide invaluable information for spies. It would be like the Central Intelligence Agency getting its hands on engineers' drawings of the Kremlin.

Yet some of these vital documents

have been literally lying around in non-secure offices inside the General Services Administration. They are intended for the use of private contractors who work on White House projects, but anyone who looks as if he knows what he's doing can examine them, and even walk away with copies.

My associate Dale Van Atta, dressed in cowboy boots, corduroy pants and non-matching jacket, visited the GSA one sunny day and browsed around the area where these contractors' documents are kept. There were no security guards. Nobody challenged him.

He had previously obtained a copy of an architect's drawing of the White House "underground utilities," stamped "For Official Use Only." He also got a copy of an unclassified map titled "White House Grounds," showing the various ducts, conduits and manholes installed under the lawns and driveways around the executive mansion.

But the real paydirt was located in an unlocked file-cabinet drawer clearly labeled as containing White House material. It was a 19-sheet collection of oversized architectural drawings, which Van Atta spread out on top of the cabinet to study. No one questioned him; in fact, one government worker offered to Xerox the material for him.

"Primary Electrical Systems and Shelter Improvements" was the title

on the first page, which was a detailed map of the White House sewer and electrical systems. It had the appearance of being an aerial photo of the White House taken with an X-ray camera.

Exact locations and distances were neatly noted on the map, the protective fences, the red ash tree, the 60-foot burr oak, guardhouses, drains, electrical conduits, high-water alarm systems, everything.

The 18 following pages included schematic drawings entitled "Power Line One Diagrams," "East Vault and Shelter Power System Control and Instrumentation," "Mansion Vault and West Wing Vault Power System Control and Instrumentation," "Electrical Site Plan," "Plans—East Vault, Shelter and Data Processing Room," "Plans—Mansion Vault, West Wing Vault and East Wing," "Electrical Schedules," "Electrical Controls," and "Panels and Controls."

Originally classified simply "For Official Use Only," the 19-page document was later classified "Confidential" by the White House Military Office, with the instruction: "Declassify on 19 August 2000."

Footnote: The Secret Service was appalled at Van Atta's easy access to the White House plans, and assured us the problem will be corrected. In return, we assured the Secret Service their secrets were safe with us, certainly a lot safer than with the GSA.